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HISTORIC SPOTS IN WISCONSIN

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IX. GRAND BUTTE DES MORTS, A HAMLET WITH A HISTORY

No more shall the war-cry sever,
Nor the winding river be red.

Few locations in Wisconsin combine archæological and historical interest to so great a degree as does Butte des Morts, a hamlet in Winnebago County situated on the north side of the Fox River about a mile or two below its confluence with the Wolf. The present day village occupies the slightly curved summit of a broad natural mound that rises gradually and gracefully from the river bank.

The view from this elevation is magnificent. On the one side is the river with its broad marshes and wild rice fields which harbor untold numbers of game birds now, as they did when the Indians were the only inhabitants. In the opposite direction, the eye wanders over miles of fertile and highly cultivated farms which were covered with virgin forests a century ago.

It is not remarkable that the aborigines were early attracted to a spot so favored by nature, and of such strategic importance in the control of the great inland waterway. The Indian could replenish his food supply with fish and fowl from the river in front and with deer and other game from the forests in the rear. In the tribal wars before the coming of the French explorers, the advantage of dominating this canoe route must have been considerable, and after hostilities began between the French and the Fox Indians, the latter made this one of several fortified points that gave them control of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway for many years.

The early French voyageurs found on this eminence an extensive burying ground of the Winnebago and therefore designated the place "Grand Butte des Morts" or Great Hill of the Dead. There is a tradition that one of the Jesuit missionaries and his attendants were massacred by the Winnebago on this spot. There are also numerous traditions of fierce battles that were fought here, first between the Fox and the Winnebago tribes, and later between the Foxes and the French forces. These accounts lack historical confirmation, but it is well known that the earlier explorers found the Winnebago located here, while later accounts show the Foxes in possession, and it is not probable that the earlier possessors were ejected without a conflict. There is a Winnebago legend to the effect that the slaughter of their people by a Fox band was the beginning of the burying ground at Grand Butte des Morts. It is an historical fact that during the first half of the eighteenth century, the Fox Indians held the river that bears their name against the passage of the French traders, and that numerous attempts were made by the French forces to dislodge these savage opponents. One account states that the French commander, Marin, after defeating the Foxes at Little Butte des Morts within the present city of Neenah, pursued them to Grand Butte where a fierce battle was fought, probably on the opposite side of and about two miles up the river, where Robert Grignon located a century later.

After the expulsion of the Foxes from the region, Butte des Morts became a Menominee village and it is so rated in the report of the Wisconsin Indian census for 1817. It was visited in 1829 by James D. Doty and Morgan L. Martin on their return trip from the Four Lakes region, and Martin reports it as a Menominee village at that time. It was at this time and place that Doty and Martin met Major Twiggs and Lieut. Jefferson Davis of the regular

army, both of whom were later prominent in the Southern Confederacy.

In 1832 when Black Hawk invaded Wisconsin with his band of Sauks and Foxes, Colonel Stambaugh raised a force of Menominee warriors to assist the white settlers in repelling the savage enemy. His command consisted of over three hundred Indians led by a number of well-known chiefs, among whom were Oshkosh, Souigny, Carron, Waunauko, Pewautenot, and La Mott. These recruits were divided into two companies; one under the command of Augustin Grignon of Butte des Morts, and the other under George Johnston of Green Bay. The expedition proceeded from Green Bay to Butte des Morts, where the Fox River was crossed and the march continued southward. The Menominee were generally friendly to the white settlers, and were always accounted among the best of the Wisconsin Indians.

Butte des Morts was undoubtedly a trading post during the period of French and British occupancy, but the earlier references to it are only casual. Later the name occurs frequently in the records of the Green Bay traders, and it seems to have been a winter and summer post, unlike some of the minor trading posts that were occupied during the winter only. Augustin Grignon was an agent at the Butte des Morts trading post for a number of years before he became a permanent resident. His nephew, Robert Grignon, located about three miles farther up the river and on the opposite side, near the traditional site of the battle between the French and the Fox Indians. Augustin was undoubtedly the ablest of the Grignon family, and many stories are told of his courtesy and hospitality. A grandson of Charles de Langlade, he inherited much of the energy of his distinguished ancestor. He was well educated for his time, and his home at Butte des Morts was a rendezvous for the noted men of early Wisconsin. Eleazar Williams, who

posed as the "lost Dauphin," was a guest in Grignon's home in 1852. In 1858 Dr. Lyman Draper spent considerable time with Grignon, then seventy-eight years of age, and heard from his lips the well known "Recollections" which make such a valuable addition to early Wisconsin history. Augustin Grignon died in 1860 and may well be called "the last of the Indian traders."

According to Louis Porlier's narrative, the trading post of Augustin Grignon and the older Porlier, then in partnership, was located in 1818 at the mouth of Overton's Creek, two miles below Butte des Morts village. The younger Porlier remembered the Grand Butte in his boyhood days as a Menominee village of about 100 wigwams, which was then considered a large Indian town. There were extensive planting grounds adjacent to the camp, and Porlier states that the natives showed considerable skill in maintaining the fertility of the soil by a crude system of crop rotation. He says that each family worked its own patch of land instead of working in common as was customary with some Indian communities. The products of the cultivated fields were supplemented by the wild rice which they gathered from the river marshes in front of their village as well as from the more distant Buffalo Lake (*Lac du Bœuf*), and Lakes Puckaway and Poygan. With something of an understanding of the relation between food and climate, they subsisted largely on grains and vegetables in summer and on game in the winter. There were a number of other Menominee villages in the region, the one at Shawano being their seat of government and the residence of their grand sachem and head chiefs. Porlier states that in the early days the Menominee were disinclined to intermarry with the Winnebago, whom they considered an inferior race.

Louis Porlier married a daughter of Augustin Grignon and succeeded the latter as trader at the Butte des Morts

post. By this time the business had become very unprofitable, due to the scarcity of fur-bearing animals and the demoralization of the Indians, who would procure all the credit possible without any intention of repaying the advances made to them.

In the early part of August, 1827 a great council was held at Little Butte des Morts with the Winnebago, Chippewa, and Menominee tribes. During this meeting news came of the hostile acts of the Winnebago of the Mississippi region where a number of white settlers had been killed in a treacherous manner. Major William Whistler, then in command at Fort Howard, made it clear to the Winnebago who came to the council that they must surrender the aggressors Red Bird and Wekau to stand trial for murder or face a war of extermination. The result was that these warriors surrendered soon after at the portage, were tried for murder, and sentenced to death. Red Bird died in prison before the date set for the execution, and Wekau's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment after all the arrangements had been made for his hanging.

In 1848 another council was held with the Menominee Indians near Lake Poygan. Commissioner Medill tried to induce the natives to submit to removal to a reservation, but found them obdurate. Their tendency to roam freely over a large area of the state was retarding settlement and it was felt necessary to threaten them with eviction if they longer refused to accept the terms prescribed in the treaty of 1836. Realizing the uselessness of further resistance, the chiefs agreed to remove to the reservation near Shawano which had been provided for them, and the aborigines disappeared forever from the vicinity of the Fox River which had been their favorite camping ground for centuries.

The Butte des Morts of today is an attractive place as it was in the long ago. The marshes and wild rice fields

through which the river meanders are still the hunters' paradise, and summer cottages and hunters' lodges line the banks for a considerable distance from the village. The dense forests of a century ago have disappeared and beautiful farms have taken their place, but one may well imagine that the river and the wild rice marshes have changed but little since the days when Nicolet, Marquette, La Salle, Jolliet, Hennepin, Carver, and a host of lesser explorers skirted the shore line of the sinister Hill of the Dead.